

Senate Bill 144
March 17, 2011
Presented by Joe Maurier
House Fish, Wildlife & Parks Committee

Mr. Chairman and committee members, I am Joe Maurier, Director of Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP). I am here in opposition to Senate Bill 144.

Bison are the only big game species that were here at the time of Lewis and Clark that haven't been restored to Montana. Fish and wildlife agencies have done a great job the last 100 years restoring deer, elk and antelope. We have ignored bison. The bison population in Yellowstone National Park represents the largest remaining wild herd of plains bison, making it of significant conservation value. As you know, bison are also of significant interest to numerous people and organizations, including Native American Tribes both in and outside of Montana.

Bison in and around YNP are currently managed under the auspices of the Interagency Bison Management Plan (IBMP). The IBMP includes provisions for the cooperating agencies and Tribes (FWP, DOL, APHIS, NPS, USFS, Confederated Salish and Kootenai, Nez Perce Tribe, Intertribal Bison Cooperative) to design, locate, and operate a bison quarantine facility to provide an alternative to either hazing or slaughtering bison that come out of the Park, and to provide a disease free source of bison to be used for conservation purposes.

In the IBMP, the cooperating agencies agreed that the capture and relocation of bison to other suitable habitats would be an appropriate alternative to lethal removal of bison that exceed the population objectives for Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. The IBMP states "DOL and FWP agree that relocation of live bison that are certified as brucellosis-free is a sound approach for removing bison that cannot be accommodated within the Yellowstone system."

The Environmental Assessment for the quarantine study included a process for distribution of bison that successfully complete the quarantine protocol. That process included considerable public review and comment. Animal and Plant Health Inspections Service (APHIS) has stated that during the five years of quarantine that these bison would be considered research animals, and as such, would not affect the state's brucellosis-free status, even if one or more animals were to test positive for brucellosis.

FWP understands there are concerns about the relocation of bison from the quarantine facility. One of these concerns is that these animals may not be brucellosis free. However, bison that move through the quarantine facility are among the most tested animals there are – they have undergone far more testing than any livestock and are considered brucellosis-free by Montana's State Veterinarian and the federal regulatory agency – APHIS – charged with oversight of this disease. If you don't believe in this science, then you have thrown out the entire structure of the entire U. S. animal health system we have relied on for decades to control disease. Is that the picture you want to project about animal health and safety of the U. S. food supply? If you believe in science, these animals are safer than any other animal in Montana, or the world for that matter.

The new federal rules for disease management are very helpful for addressing brucellosis concerns going forward.

There is concern that a decision to translocate these bison will be made without consideration for the potential impact on surrounding landowners or land uses. However, any potential

translocation would be subject to an Environmental Assessment and include opportunity for public comment. FWP is firmly committed to protecting personal property rights and ensuring that these bison stay where they are placed.

Ultimately, a long-range solution for bison conservation in Montana outside of YNP is needed. FWP is in the beginning stages of developing a statewide bison management and conservation plan. That plan will explore what, if any, potential there is for bison restoration in the area around YNP as well as other parts of Montana. Disease risk and compatibility of bison restoration with other land uses will obviously be major factors considered in that process. The planning process will include extensive public outreach and involvement.

This bill eliminates options before they can even be explored and would force FWP to slaughter what are now very valuable bison – from both a monetary investment and conservation value. It would permanently preclude use of these valuable, disease-free bison for any restoration purpose, including on sovereign Tribal reservations within the state of Montana.

Having herds in areas outside of Yellowstone, where our “eggs are all in one basket” ensures against the threat of the endangered species act complicating bison management.

FWP believes that there will be sufficient checks and balances built into any proposal to translocate quarantine study bison to protect all interests. FWP respectfully asks that you table SB144.